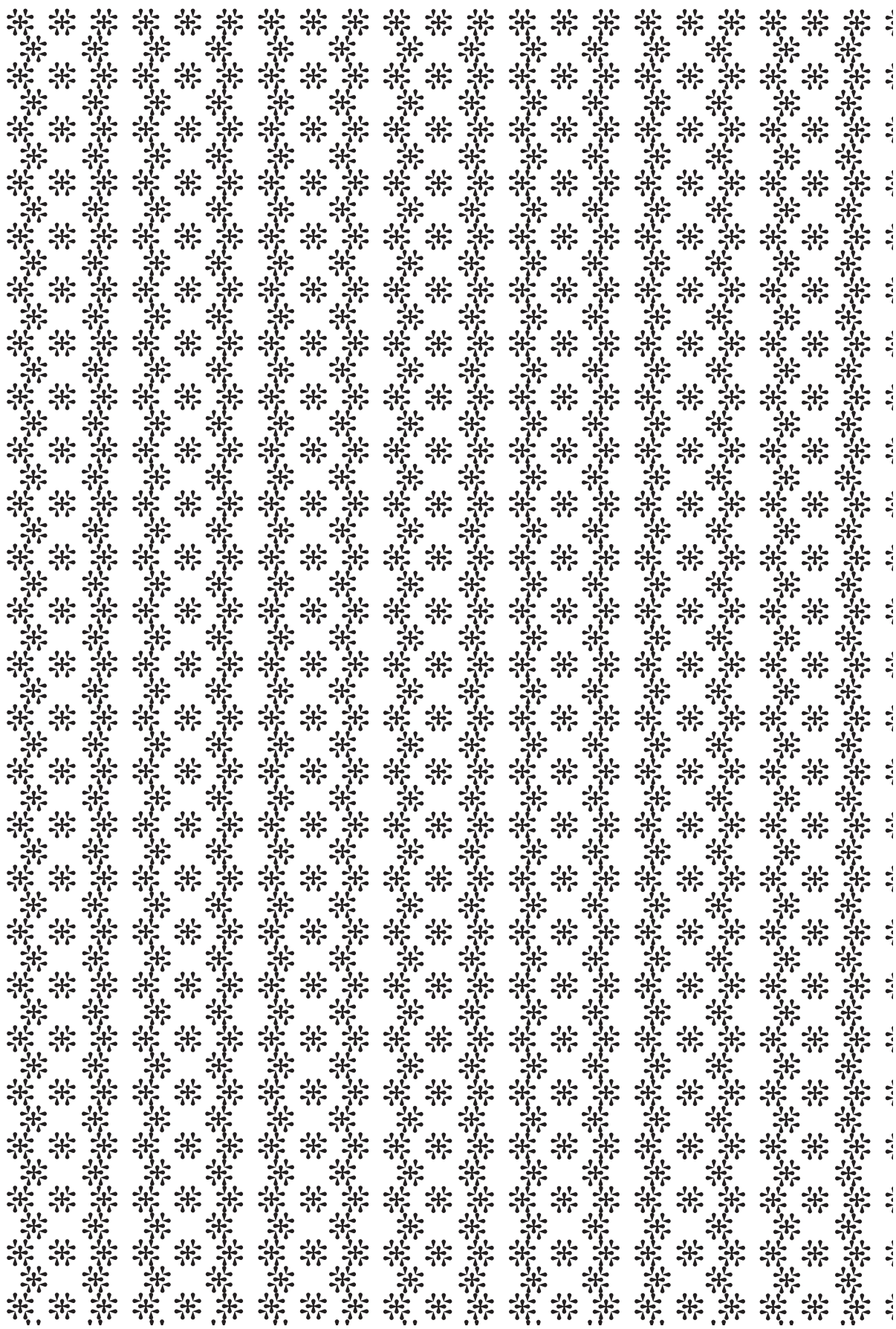


The Wild Rose Asylum

AKRON SERIES IN POETRY



The Wild Rose Asylum

Poems of the Magdalen
Laundries of Ireland

Rachel Dilworth

WINNER OF THE 2008 AKRON POETRY PRIZE, CHOSEN BY RITA DOVE

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Foreword

Until 1996, and with origins dating back to 1767, residential institutions that came to be known as Magdalen laundries—also called Magdalen asylums, homes, and female penitentiaries—existed in Ireland. Taking their name from Mary Magdalen, Christianity’s exemplar of female penitence and redemption, and from the difficult laundry labor required of inmates to finance the institutions, Magdalen laundries were facilities for the managed care, reformation, and containment of “fallen women.”

A number of Ireland’s smaller asylums, including its first, were run by Protestant lay people. But by far the largest and ultimately most controversial institutions were run from the mid-1800s onward by four female orders of the Catholic Church: the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Refuge, Good Shepherds, Sisters of Mercy, and Irish Sisters of Charity. Early laundries focused on providing prostitutes, women who had been “compromised,” and unwed mothers with temporary refuge and rehabilitation for Victorian society. Over time, however, and by early-to-mid years of the twentieth century, the nature of the convent laundry seems to have changed to feared and confining penitentiary.

By then, the counties that became independent Ireland contained ten convent laundries, most housing over one hundred (and some, one hundred fifty to two hundred) inmates at a time, not free to leave. Women and girls seen as morally deviant, at risk, or socially undesirable were brought by town priests, family members, nuns at other Church-run institutions, employers, officials, and court order. These women included a major subset of unwed mothers, in addition to teenagers merely suspected or thought in danger of sexual activity (for instance, due to “boldness”), victims of sexual assault and incest, women with mild mental challenges, women who had committed infanticide, prostitutes, and others considered vulnerable, problematic, or “bad.” Most were confined without legal sentence, and women spent years in arduous unpaid labor, austere denial, and constant prayer.

Many women became so institutionalized, they were unable to function “outside.” Others became so frightened of men, so scarred by lack of normal social relationships or loss of a child, they lived permanently damaged lives. Some have reported being victimized by men while in the asylums.

With social and other advances in later decades of the twentieth century, the laundries seem to have begun to change again, and one by one, they closed. Characterized until the 1990s by collective silence, the issue of the institutions is an extremely complicated one. So many women arrived at Church-run laundries already abandoned by families, lovers, or larger community. To date, historians have not been given access to the twentieth-century records of the convent laundries. The number of Irish women who passed through the institutions therefore remains unknown. There is a commonly used estimate of 30,000.

Author's Note

The poems in this book grew largely from my experiences of living in Ireland for a year, 1999–2000, to try to learn and write about the highly complex, sensitive, and disturbing issue of the laundries. What happened to individual women, and to so many collectively, moved me again and again beyond words; and it challenged me, as a woman and a person, to try to find my way back to them. These poems attempt to render different elements of what I took away and a sense of factors, perspectives, social mores, and experiences related to the laundries' existence. I surely acknowledge and respect that there are so many different personal experiences (many still remaining untold or unknown), feelings, and views among people who lived the reality and circumstances of these institutions, and in no way do I mean anything here to contradict the scope of that. Moreover, these poems were written by an American, someone who approached the subject in Ireland at a particular time, a poet not a historian; and for any ways that I may have seemed to err, I sincerely apologize. I know that I offer the poems as a woman looking at the issue of the laundries "from the outside," but I would like to say very genuinely, they were written in hopes of affirming that none of us is ever *outside* of a subject like this, and if we are, we are in the wrong place.

*And I took all the blame out of all sense and reason,
until I cried and trembled and rocked to and fro,
riddled with light.*

—W. B. Yeats, “The Cold Heaven”



The Magdalen Laundries

I.

Laundry seems so benign, no real sentence
on its own—stress falling on the first syllable
with its gauzy vowels, its clean-rinse consonants.

The word doesn't sound like the scald and pound, the beating
of steam machines. It smells nothing like
fifteen-foot walls of stone scabbed with mold

or the rank stench of bleach, doesn't burn like sweat
and chemicals on newly opened skin.

Penitentiary is less misleading,

it calls up zoos and jailed collections: bestiary,
aviary. *Penitents*. That word
slaps at your mouth with the good hurt of church.

II.

They were *unmanageable*, these women.
A priest marked Chrissie early on: in moral danger
since she'd been orphaned. Clare was another matter,

she'd tried to run from home when her Da had come looking
for fun, juiced-up and mean. The Gardai caught her
the next day hitching out of the county.

It was drink chased Rose the months it rained
with Himself away hustling work, while lads in the lanes
came for Eve each day once her soldier'd moved on.

Mary and Annie were slow, saw life like tall children.
The other scores of penitents were stained
with the filthiest sins: heavy mounds of heart

and stirring blood, well-rounded evidence
of ash and dust, of flesh of one flesh.
They would never be clean again. Who could forgive this?

III.

No need for any name but Magdalen
so the others disappeared: Bridie, Kitty,
Maureen, Shauna, Medbh, Lizzie, Kathleen,

all gone. Best to purify the past
of the pull in recollection. Auburn,
chestnut, honey—all lopped off

with abrupt swipes. There was satisfaction in the rough,
blunt line of the first cut, in harvesting the vain
tresses, in bulby heads smudged with hair.

No thought of the rivering strands that had dried
the feet of Christ, no memory that red lips kissed Him,
that the Magdalen had washed God with her tears.

IV.

*God, but I'd love to see her. You'd think
it was her fault, poor wee bastard. You'd think
she was death Himself the way they swept her off. Bleedin'
Sisters will tell her I'm dead, or left her somewhere.
They'll tell her that I never wanted her.*

*Ah Sheila, leave be. There's nothin'll come of that talk.
Listen to Deirdre now—I've a girl as well,
you know, in the industrial school. You've got
to not want her, pray Jesus you never see her,
'cause if you do, it'll mean she's one of us.*